

FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT NETWORK
FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS WHO HELP OR CARE FOR OLDER ADULTS

A member of the Family Caregiver Support Network Advisory Committee once said that as a caregiver ‘people always ask how your mother or father, husband or wife is but rarely ask how you are doing’. So, how are **you** doing? *You* are the *I* in caregiver and only you can answer that question.

Caregiving even for the most *i*ndependent *i*ndividual can be and most often is lonely. It is lonely at times even when we have help because it is such an *i*ndividual thing. Let’s take the two sisters both willing to assist mom with her groceries. One believes in getting her out and into the store as ‘an outing’ while the other cannot handle the amount of time it takes to read the new product labels so she prefers to shop for her mother. Sound familiar? Lonely is not a bad thing as long as the feeling of being alone does not create the stress associated with feeling *i*solated.

Caregiving brings change into our lives. Change brings on stress and impacts our lives in ways we may not even realize. The type of stress we live with depends on whether we have selected a role as *v*ictim, *s*urvivor or *n*avigator. Which role do you think you are? *N*avigator is where you need to strive to be.

A critical thing to understand about “caregiver stress” is that it is not for *s*issies (Wow! A double whammy of ‘i’s.). Stress can not be taken lightly if we want to remain both healthy and a good caregiver. When we live with stress our bodies are in turmoil. Constant turmoil is not healthy and our body actually responds in predictable ways:

- All of our senses are heightened.
- Our hearing can be more acute and our eyes can dart from side to side.
- Our blood pressure and pulse increase and our heart can race.
- We breathe more quickly but with more shallow breaths.
- Constant stress lowers our immune system.
- Our thyroid speeds up and we can feel jittery.
- Because we are jittery we can loose weight or because we do not take time to prepare meals we gain weight from eating out more and/or not exercising.
- We do not produce as many sex hormones so our sex drive decreases.
- We put out more insulin and no longer metabolize sugar well so we have an increased tendency towards diabetes.
- Our cholesterol increases which can lead to an increased chance of stroke and heart disease.

We need to listen to what to our bodies are saying to us. The following five suggestions will go a long way to help maintain physical, emotional and spiritual well-being:

Exercise is the easiest and most beneficial thing we can do to help our bodies. A regular exercise routine of even 20 minutes a day helps us feel better physically and mentally. It allows us to be alone with our thoughts and we can concentrate on our bodies so we stay well.

We get busy as caregivers and we may not take the time to think about our **nutrition**, what we are putting into our own bodies, even though we watch what our loved ones eat very carefully. We may eat out more, eat more fast food or snack more. We may be upset, lose our appetite and eat less. We feel tired and need energy so we eat more sugar and caffeine. We often forget that it is as easy to cut up an apple as it is to dig into the ice cream, and that a glass of water will go a long way toward keeping us hydrated. In addition is important to consume enough vitamins, especially from fruits and vegetables.

Taking care of our **mental health** lets us blow off steam. There is no road map to caregiving; at times it is constant change. Most caregivers say that only other caregivers 'get it'. So how do we hold our emotions in check? How and to whom do we express our anxieties and still feel safe? Who will listen? For some caregivers the answer is to join a caregiver support group. For others it is seeing a therapist. (Our office has lists of both.)

We once asked a large group of caregivers at a conference what helps them through their days. 85% said their **"faith."** Most believe they do not walk their journey alone and without spirituality they would not make it through most days. Prayer can be a form of meditation. It causes mental relaxation. People also find their strength through worship, prayer, song and fellowship. Prayer and meditation help to counteract many of the negative symptoms of stress.

Lastly, **reclaim your life** to include 'caregiver' but not to be only a caregiver. You are the daughter or son, wife or husband who is now also a caregiver. Write down all the roles that you now have and remember you should have no more than seven, including that of caregiver. Once you have done that, can you...Take a class? Plant a garden? Walk your dog? Go fishing? Get a job? **...and somehow remember there is no 'i' in stressonly in 'caregiver'**

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